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ABSTRACT

In hoping for a brighter future of self-government and self-determination, Canadian Aboriginal communities have placed great hopes and expectations on their youth. The complexity and uniqueness of career-related issues pose a formidable challenge in the development of career counseling programs for Aboriginal youth. This digest describes the process involved in creating "Career Counselling for Aboriginal Youth: The Journey Inward; The Journey Outward," a program based on the traditional concept of a vision quest. The participatory, program-planning approach resulted in several important outcomes: (1) the participatory process continued into program implementation; (2) planning team members from Aboriginal communities became strong program advocates; (3) the communities demonstrated ownership of the program and encouraged community member participation; and (4) new inter-community and inter-agency networks resulted in other partnership initiatives. Most importantly, the participatory process resulted in a program which integrated appropriate knowledge and cultural components in a career-counseling program which met the needs of Aboriginal youth. (RB)

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by Anne Poonwassie

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ERIC DIGEST

1995 EDO-CG-95-47

Career Counseling for Aboriginal Youth: A Community-Based Program Development Approach

Anne Poonwassie

Overview

Education philosophies originate within specific socio-cultural contexts, which are characterized by unique problems and issues (Elias & Merriam, 1980). Historically, Canadian Aboriginal peoples have been denied the opportunity to develop need-based, culturally relevant programs. Instead, government has used education systems to undermine Canadian Aboriginals' tribal organization, their forms of leadership, their spiritual beliefs, their health system, and their economic system. The result is a legacy of poverty and deprivation.

In hoping for a brighter future of self-government and self-determination, Aboriginal communities have placed great hopes and expectations on their youth: "From our children will come those braves, who will carry the torches to the places where our ancestors rest .... This is how the void will be filled between the old and the new ways" (Chief Dan George, 1974, p. 55). This vision is becoming a reality. In search of their identity, many Aboriginal youths are reclaiming their culture - not as an attempt to return to the past, but as a resolve to participate in society as equals, and on their own terms (Berger, 1985).

The complexity and uniqueness of career-related issues pose a formidable challenge in the development of career-counseling programs for Aboriginal youth. Program planners must recognize that most of the answers and solutions for a successful program rest within Aboriginal communities. In keeping with this community-based view, *Career Counselling for Aboriginal Youth: The Journey Inward; The Journey Outward* was developed.

The Guiding Principles

Planning should involve all program stakeholders and should also acknowledge that many unknown cross-cultural variables need to be incorporated into the planning process. Thus, program development should be participatory and open to change as the various planning components evolve (Nadler, 1983). The aim of the planning model should be to facilitate self-determination and social change by espousing mutual respect and sharing as key components of the planning process. Planning and decision-making responsibilities should be shared and control should be negotiated on an on-going basis by program development team members (Freire, 1973).

The Planning Components

To meet the needs of Aboriginal youth, as well as the aspirations of their home communities, the following key components should be considered by program planners:

- The program development team should include representation from the agency or community requesting the program, the institution which will offer the program, and resource people with career counseling expertise. In order to focus on the program's outcome vision, invite an Aboriginal Elder to guide the program planning team.
- Negotiate the terms of reference for team member participation and/or leadership in all planning activities — possibly two or more subgroups working on various planning components simultaneously, based on their areas of expertise and/or interest. The planning team should utilize consensus decision making on an on-going basis as the various planning components are integrated and finalized.
- Establish a community advisory team to be involved in all planning activities.
- Conduct a comprehensive literature review of all topics relevant to career counseling and Aboriginal youth. Include a review of previous and existing programs which successfully integrated cultural imperatives.
- Select the agencies, communities and/or groups for data collection and identify the specific members to be surveyed, (e.g., youths, parents, teachers, leaders, Elders, counselors). Note that each Aboriginal community is quite distinct in terms of size, geographical location, proximity to a large center (versus isolation), accessibility (by road versus aircraft), history, cultural practices (versus adaptation of mainstream society's practices), and so forth. Ensure that the sample is representative of the youth who will participate in the program.
- Plan, develop, and field test research instruments.

In some cases, focus groups, community meetings, or one-on-one interviews may be more appropriate and useful than surveys and/or questionnaires.

- Collect field test data. Ensure that researchers are familiar with the language and protocol of each community and solicit the support of local leadership before beginning the research. Ideally, the researcher should be a member of the planning team and should spend five to seven days in each community. A journal of relevant experiences and/or observations is a useful supplement to formal survey findings.
- Analyze the findings and consider how they relate to the literature review. Present a summary to the community advisory team and discuss the implications of the findings on the design of the career-counseling program.
- Based on the research summary and the input from the community advisory team, develop manuals for the program facilitators and participants.
- Conduct and evaluate a pilot program and make appropriate revisions.

The Program

The above process was utilized to develop *Career Counselling for Aboriginal Youth: The Journey Inward; The Journey Outward* to prepare counselors to work with Aboriginal youth. The key program content came from surveys and focus groups conducted with the youth themselves. They shared fear of failure in the mainstream educational system, unresolved hurts from family violence and/or family break-up, inability to survive the prejudice and discrimination in the "outside world," and, most of all, confusion about their culture and identity.

In order to address these issues, the program is based on the traditional concept of a vision quest, and focuses on (a) enhancing self-esteem, (b) healing past hurts, and (c) modeling Aboriginal values by integrating Aboriginal imperatives and rituals into the program content and delivery process. The training consists of two 1-week modules: In Week One, "The Journey Inward," counselors enhance their understanding of Aboriginal adolescent difficulties and barriers by exploring their own adolescent experiences and assessing how these factors affect their clients' career development. In Week Two, "The Journey Outward," the counselors integrate the knowledge gained in Week One into a holistic counseling model which (a) incorporates appropriate cultural imperatives and practices, (b) utilizes community-based resources, and (c) reflects the socio economic realities and aspirations of the First Nations' communities. The *Facilitator's Manual* provides a step-by-step guide, detailing the background information, the philosophy of the program, and daily activities. The Participant's Manual provides the program outline and relevant resource materials.

Conclusion

The participatory program-planning approach resulted in several important outcomes: (a) the participatory process, evolved in the planning stages, continued into program implementation, (b) planning team members from Aboriginal communities became strong program advocates, (c) the communities demonstrated ownership of the program and encouraged community members to participate in program offierings, and (d) new inter-community and inter-agency networks, established by the participatory planning process, resulted in other partnership initiatives. Most importantly, the participatory process resulted in a program which integrated appropriate knowledge and cultural components in a career-counseling program which met the needs of Aboriginal youth.

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